

# A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



**Frederick W. Stickney**  
**1853-1918**

Among the many architects who designed in the Shingle Style in Maine, Frederick W. Stickney is probably one of the least well known. Noted primarily for public architecture in his native Lowell, Massachusetts, Stickney came to Maine early in his career to design two buildings in Kennebunkport. These two Shingle Style structures showcased the talent of a young architect who clearly understood the special qualities of the life and architecture of a summer community along the Maine coast.

Frederick W. Stickney was born in Lowell on June 17, 1853, the son of Daniel and Betsy Stickney. After

his education in local schools, he entered M.I.T. as a special student in architecture. While studying in Boston, Stickney held an apprenticeship with the firm of Hartwell and Swazey and may have gained additional training under both H. H. Richardson and Henry Van Brunt.<sup>1</sup> His talent matured, and in 1877 he graduated with high honors at the head of his class, receiving the Boston Society of Architect's award for the best student work of the year. Buoyed by these accolades, he returned to his hometown to work in the office of Otis A. Merrill, a local architect.<sup>2</sup> By 1881 he had ventured out on his own, opening an office at 131 Devonshire Street in Boston and only two years later establishing a second office in Lowell.

Frederick Stickney's early work consisted primarily of small residential and public projects within the City of Lowell, but by 1887 he was receiving commissions far and wide, including a residence in Cincinnati, Ohio and a resort hotel in Center Harbor, New Hampshire. That year Julian Talbot of Lowell asked him to design a summer cottage called "Peter's Rock" in Kennebunkport<sup>3</sup> (Figure 1). By this point Stickney had achieved a professional reputation in Lowell; and although there may have been a personal connection, he was probably the most prominent local architect for Talbot to choose. He designed an elongated cottage in the Shingle Style with a double-pitched roof on the entrance side and a steep, single-pitched roof sloping down over an open porch on the ocean side. This longitudinal block is punctuated by a large gambrel cross gable and small dormers on both elevations. A large porte-cochere extends from the front of the cross gable on the entrance elevation, featuring wide round-arched openings and a set of stairs leading to an open porch overhead.

Stickney's prior work was primarily Queen Anne, but here he chose the Shingle Style, probably a response to the style of cottages being constructed on nearby Cape Arundel. Since 1870 Kennebunkport had grown quickly into a summer resort community, and "Peter's Rock" was one of several cottages built between 1887 and 1888. Like many of these cottages, Stickney's design exhibited the wealth of the client in



Figure 1. "Peter's Rock," Julian Talbot Cottage, Kennebunkport, circa 1890 view (MHPC).

a subtle, restrained manner. Despite his inexperience with the style, Stickney successfully attained the land-ocean facade duality that often characterized the Shingle Style.

Another sign of the growth of Kennebunkport's summer colony was the heightened interest in having a boating club. During the 1870s canoeing on the Kennebunk River had grown in popularity as a past-time for summer residents, and soon a group of men established the Lobster Boat and Canoe Club, "by which they might better enjoy the time spent here."<sup>4</sup> The idea of a boating club caught on and membership swelled. By 1888 the crowded wharves necessitated the building of a boat house for the club, and during the next year members agreed upon the idea. At the same time, the club's name was changed to the Kennebunk River Club.<sup>5</sup>

The club selected Frederick Stickney as architect, a logical choice for two reasons. Julian Talbot was one of the original members of the River Club, eventually holding positions as director and vice president in the early 1890s. Thus Talbot provided a connection between Stickney and the club. In addition, Stickney was a prominent member of the Vesper Boat Club in Lowell, active as an accomplished oarsman, club secretary, and architect of the group's boat house in 1879 as well as the Vesper Country Club in 1905. Rowing, canoeing, and sailing were popular on the Merrimac

River at Vesper during the latter decades of the nineteenth century, and the club performed well in competition with other boat clubs from New England and around the country.<sup>6</sup> Competition between the River Club and Vesper is undocumented, but Stickney's role as a member and architect for such a renowned boat club undoubtedly played a major part in his selection at Kennebunkport.

Stickney designed a dramatic, all-encompassing gable roofed structure for the Kennebunk River Club, with a wide gable end facing Ocean Avenue and another overlooking the Kennebunk River (Figures 2, 3). The land facade features a symmetrical arrangement of small window openings and a centered entrance porch which is reached by a long boardwalk from the street. In striking contrast, the river elevation exhibits a light, open quality that reflects the sociability and freedom of the river. Here the first floor features an open porch with five flat-arched openings and shingled balustrades. Stairs step down from the central opening to a deck leading to docks below. Above the facade is breached by an elliptical arched opening which reveals a second floor porch with an X-braced balustrade. This powerful element dominates the entire boat house, but is balanced by the broad sweep of the roof and augments the gable's expressiveness. The monumentality of this structure is heightened even further through its extreme set-



Figure 2. Kennebunk River Club, Kennebunkport, circa 1905 view (MHPG).

back from Ocean Avenue and its isolation on the river bank.

Inside a social room occupies the first floor, open the full width of the building and featuring a stone fireplace at one end. A flying staircase leads up to the second floor sail loft through an opening large enough for hoisting sails.<sup>7</sup> Exposed beams and trusses and unfinished surfaces add a rustic, casual flavor to the interior.

Constructed between 1889 and 1890, the River Club seems to derive its dramatic form from two sources: the functional requirements of the building and the expressive nature of the Shingle Style. The need for a large, open interior space for the hoisting, drying, and storage of sails is met by the wide gable roof. This creates a suitable sail loft below the eaves. This type of construction also allowed for a grand social space on the first floor, while the openness of the river elevation accommodated the viewing of the races, the annual river carnival, and other events.

There were several notable Shingle Style designs created during the 1880s that employed a similar gable theme, and Frederick Stickney must have been aware of these. The most obvious example is McKim, Mead and White's Low House of 1887 at Bristol, Rhode Island. This project is often seen as the culmination of the encompassing gable roof as an expressive form in the Shingle Style. An earlier source may

well have been John Calvin Stevens' "House by the Sea", published in *American Architect and Building News* in 1885.<sup>8</sup> In the case of the River Club, it is surprising to see such a forceful Shingle Style composition from an architect who worked only sporadically in the style. However, with the inspiration provided by the master works of contemporary Shingle Style architects, combined with Stickney's innate talents, it is not surprising that he was capable of designing such a significant piece of architecture.

Frederick Stickney's career progressed in the ensuing years. He acquired several commissions for schools in his hometown and in 1890 won the competition to design Memorial Hall in Lowell. In 1892 he joined with William Austin of Boston, a partnership which lasted eight years. He then operated his own office in Lowell until his death in 1918. Stickney apparently never returned to design in Maine and only worked a few more times in the Shingle Style, producing instead buildings in the Queen Anne and Richardsonian Romanesque. However, his works in this state are testaments to his skill, and the Kennebunk River Club stands as a masterpiece of Maine's Shingle Style architecture.

Jeffrey A. Harris



Figure 3. Kennebunk River Club, Kennebunkport, 1990 view (MHPC).

## NOTES

1. Frederick Stickney file, Lowell Historic Board, Lowell, Massachusetts. The references to H. H. Richardson and Henry Van Brunt are limited, but Stickney's skill with and preference for the Queen Anne and Richardsonian Romanesque indicates a high level of training with firms on par with the two above.
2. Henry F. and Elsie R. Withey, *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased)*, Los Angeles, 1970, p. 575.
3. Little is known about Julian Talbot except for his affluence, which is readily apparent through his activities in Kennebunkport. A second cottage was built for him in 1895, and the local summer newspaper, *The Wave*, had several references to him and his family. For example, on October 19, 1899, it reported that "it took seven freight cars to take the Talbots home."
4. *Constitution, By-Laws and Members of the Kennebunk River Club*, Boston, 1901, p. 36.
5. Patricia Chandley, *Kennebunk River Club: The Course of 100 Years*, 1989, p. 6.
6. Brendan D. Leahey, *100 Years at Vesper*, Lowell, Massachusetts, 1975, p. 18.
7. Kennebunk River Club National Register Nomination, Maine Historic Preservation Commission files.
8. Stickney's knowledge of John Calvin Stevens' work is also reflected in his design of the Vesper Country Club in 1905, a Shingle Style structure that borrows heavily from Stevens' C. A. Brown Cottage of 1885-86 at Delano Park, Cape Elizabeth, with its use of the double peaked gable ends.

## LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY FREDERICK W. STICKNEY

"Peter's Rock", Julian Talbot Cottage, Main Street,  
Kennebunkport, 1887, Altered  
Kennebunk River Club, Ocean Avenue, Kennebunkport,  
1889-90, Addition in 1908, Extant

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